

Speakers and Entertainment

The Newest Trends That Spark Attendance

By Steve Winston



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Experience.” It’s the word heard over and over again when speaking to association planners. These days — especially after the past few years — meetings need to be experiences. Education is obviously important. But many associations are beginning to realize that if they’re asking folks to travel great distances and stay in hotels — at their own expense — while giving up several days of work, they’d better provide something experiential in addition to education: experiences that will send them home not only more knowledgeable, but also more enthused, more engaged and more inspired!

VISIONARIES INFORM AND INSPIRE

Susan Farrell is senior director of education and learning services for SmithBucklin, the largest association-management company in the world. And she has a front-row seat on the speakers and entertainers that associations are using these days.

“The right speaker can really spark attendance,” Farrell says. “I think the most important thing is to have a speaker who’s a visionary...someone who’s innovative, who can present new ideas or information about the future...and who can fill the attendees with

enthusiasm about these new ideas. When considering a speaker, it’s important to determine the needs of the people who will spend the money to come, in order to get knowledge that will help them perform better. And we have to be sure the speaker whom we select will meet those needs.”

Farrell says that even the most famous speaker is not enough in itself to get people to come. They’ll come only when they believe the content is right for them, and the speaker will provide them with knowledge that will help them perform better. Knowledge, she says, is the greatest motivational tool, not a famous speaker.

In the past, she says, there was a trend toward using people such as sports figures who became successful in business, or regular people with inspiring stories. But no more.

“People are no longer willing to travel halfway across the country just to hear stories,” Farrell says. “But they will travel to hear visionaries or economists, or people who can speak about the impact of legislation or reform on their businesses. And they’ll travel to hear heroes who can talk about crisis-management or resourcefulness...people such as Captain Sullenberger or Rudy Giuliani or former Navy Seals.”

Diane Goodman, CMP, president of Windsor, CT-based Goodman Speakers Bureau, also believes celebrity is no longer king when it comes to speakers. “Content is king now,” says Goodman. “It has to be relevant for the attendees. How can we lead



Photo courtesy of Key Artist Group

Merging content and entertainment, the eye-catching “Eye Droids” troupe displays customized meeting messaging to attendees via iPad helmets.

better? How can we increase retention? How can we better service our members? How can we grow our membership? How can we enhance our team-building and collaborative efforts? And how can we be better innovators?”

BOOKED ON A FEELING

Brian Palmer, CMM, president of National Speakers Bureau, an Illinois-based company, notes that sometimes speakers are chosen for the wrong reasons. And when that happens, attendees are reluctant to come again the following year. “Often, planners base decisions about a speaker on emotion. What really matters, however, is how effective he’ll be with this particular group. We have a saying here, based on the old song, ‘Hooked on a Feeling.’ Too often, entertainers are ‘Booked on a Feeling.’ You need to base your decision on solid, objective information, and on the goals and objectives of your meeting. Otherwise, your speaker will flop. And your attendance the following year will do the same.”

Michelle Lemmons-Poscente is founder/chairman of ISB Global, which procures speakers and entertainment for association and corporate events. “The difference between a good speaker and a great one can be the difference between success and failure for your event,” she says. “Attendees will remember a great speaker for a long time.”

Lemmons-Poscente notes that many plan-

ners are still under the misperception that using a speakers bureau or talent agency costs money. In fact, she says, it doesn’t cost money in most cases. And, in addition, since they do the negotiating for you, you’ll probably get a better price.

“The typical motivational speaker is not that much in demand anymore,” she says. “Today, associations want people who can speak about technology, about globalization, CSR, social media, innovation. They want to hear an inspiring message, true — but they want to hear it from someone who can provide them with practical advice they can use when they get back home.”

ENTERTAINMENT WITH A MESSAGE

It’s not only speakers who can provide motivation and innovation for association groups; certain types of entertainers also can spark creativity and innovation.

Lee McDonald, owner/president of Key Artist Group (Las Vegas and Orlando), says the right entertainment can provide a relevant message, while also providing an experience attendees will remember long after they’ve left the meeting. McDonald, who’s also membership director of the International Association of Corporate Entertainment Producers, represents a new act called “Eye Droids.” The troupe, created by ESP Tampa’s Dorene Collier, creative director and AJ LeBlanc, technical director, special-



Lee McDonald
Owner/President
Key Artist Group
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izes in innovation and creativity, McDonald says. Its members appear at meetings in futuristic silver outfits and helmets, with iPads positioned inside their helmets and covering their faces. And these iPads can display graphics, messaging and video, all customized for the association. They also can post messages directing attendees to the next event or meeting room. They get attendees thinking about the future while enhancing the “experience” factor.

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CELEBRITY CAUTIONARY TALE

Guy Genis is founder/CEO of Eventmakers, a Southern California firm representing speakers such as former President Bill Clinton, Microsoft’s Bill Gates, and success coach Anthony Robbins;

and entertainers such as Elton John, Bill Cosby and Jerry Seinfeld. “You can’t hire a speaker or an entertainer on a hunch,” he says, “or just because they’re a big name. If their speech or act isn’t relevant to the

audience, you’re wasting your time.” Genis adds that, often, the biggest entertainers come with the biggest riders, and they’re sometimes the most difficult to deal with. “One famous entertainer included a rider that she needed a separate room for her cats,” Genis says. “Another one didn’t want any contact with the hotel staff, so we had to build her a special tunnel to pass through. Another one has his bed shipped from home, so he has all the comforts of home.”

Genis says there’s another — perhaps unlikely — type of speaker/entertainer making inroads with associations today. He says winners of TV shows such as “Survivor,” “The Apprentice” and “American Idol” are becoming more popular — because they can convey useful messages about creativity and about persevering against the odds.

EMCEE/ENTERTAINER/TROUBLESHOOTER

“I want people to walk out of our meetings talking about the experience,” says Claire Rusk, CMP, vice president of operations of the 3,000-member Air Traffic Control Association. “Our people work hard, under a lot of pressure, all year long. They want to learn, but they also want to feel rewarded for their hard work. This year’s meeting isn’t successful if attendees aren’t inspired to sign up for next year’s meeting.”

Rusk is responsible for staging the Annual Air

Traffic Control Conference & Exposition. This year’s event, which will be held in October at Gaylord National Hotel & Convention Center near Washington DC, will be the 56th. She has 3,000 attendees and more than 125 exhibitors who want to be entertained as well as educated.

“I’ll tell you the benefits of a great speaker or entertainer,” says Rusk. “We’ve been using an emcee/magician named Bill Herz the past five years. He knows our organization, and our goals. He’s so professional that I don’t need to script him. If an act doesn’t show up, or if something goes wrong with the sets, he runs up, takes center stage and entertains the crowd as if it’s all part of the show. Most of our members never even know when something goes wrong.”

Goodman likes the approach. “You can maximize your value — and lower your price — if your speaker is also an emcee who can keep your audience engaged or if he/she can entertain them, as well.”

Rusk says that in the past there were more observers of world affairs. But these days, attendees want entertainment, as well; someone to wow them.

“Even through the recession,” Rusk adds, “our meetings have grown every year — in both attendance and exhibitors. We’re obviously giving our members what they need to come to the meetings and what they want in a program.”

Tracy Wright, CAE, is director of special projects at the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI), which has a membership of 7,000 companies and 22,000 people. She puts together the Annual House of Delegates Meetings for the association, attracting some 300 attendees every spring. And she contracts for talent for the annual Evening of Excellence Awards at each meeting.

“We need an emcee as well as entertainment,” Wright says. “But we economize by using one person for both. John Charles is a unique singer/musician/performer/comedian. He knows our organization, our goals and our attendees. He’s very engaging; he gets them excited and enthused. And he’s quick on his feet. If a backstage or scheduling problem arises during the evening, no one in the audience even realizes it.” The attendees love him so much, in fact, that NARI has already booked John Charles for its 2012 meeting.

“When you have chemistry that works,” says Wright, “and that brings attendees back year after year, there’s no reason to change it. There are a lot of factors that go into the creation of a successful

meeting. And one of the biggest is attendance. If people don’t come, the meeting isn’t successful.”

AVOIDING ‘NAPTIME AT DAYCARE’

More than 1,000 attendees from all over the country attended the Warehousing, Education, & Research Council’s (WERC) May conference in Orlando. WERC is a 2,500-member association for logistics/distribution professionals and suppliers.

“Nothing’s worse than having a great dinner on your final evening, and then having a bad speaker,” says Michael Mikitka, CEO of WERC. “This increases the chance of rolling eyes and yawns. We call it ‘naptime at daycare.’ It’ll ruin your conference. And it’ll hurt attendance the following year.”

Mikitka says WERC likes high-energy speakers and humor. And — even in the presentations from industry professionals — the program stays away from a lot of data and facts/figures in order to eliminate the yawn-factor.

The association had two excellent speakers at the May meeting, each of whom had a relevant message for attendees. Keith Ferrazzi, an author and networking expert, spoke about how the establishment and maintenance of relationships can enhance organizational success. And Robyn Benincasa, a San Diego firefighter and an Eco-Challenge Adventure Racing World Champion (running 50 miles through the desert, then swimming five miles, then cycling up a mountain, etc.) spoke about “Ordinary People, Extraordinary Results.”

“We have a great ROI from programs such as this,” says Mikitka. “Both are high-energy speakers, engaging without being too touchy-feely. They really fire up our attendees. And fired-up attendees will go back to their jobs with more focus and more creativity. This resonates very well with our people; they tell us it’s exactly what they need to be better at their jobs.”

For planners whose job it is to produce winning events, the question about budgeting for speakers and entertainment is no longer “Can we afford it?” These days, the question may be “Can we afford not to have it?”



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Photo courtesy of Anthony Tripp, AMF Photos

Singer/musician/performer/comedian John Charles serves as both entertainer and emcee for the National Association of the Remodeling Industry’s meetings. “He knows our organization, our goals, and our attendees,” says NARI’s Director of Special Projects Tracy Wright. “He’s very engaging; he gets them excited and enthused. And he’s quick on his feet — if a backstage or scheduling problem arises during the evening, no one in the audience even realizes it.”

Speaking From Experience

Danny Cox has made over 3,000 speeches. He’s a member of The Speaker Hall of Fame. And, oh yes, he’s broken the sound barrier over a thousand times.

Cox is a well-known speaker and author on the topic of being a leader in pressurized situations. And if there’s anyone who knows about “pressurized” situations, it’s him. For 10 years, he was a test pilot for the U.S. Air Force, flying F-101B Voodoo fighters at 1,200 miles-per-hour, sometimes breaking the sound barrier two or three times in the same flight.

“You want to talk about being cool under pressure?” Cox asks. “Try climbing from sea level to 35,000 feet in 90 seconds, with no horizons and a force of about 1,000



Former test pilot Danny Cox imparts hard-won wisdom about staying cool under pressure.

pounds pushing down on your head. Or try diving at 1,000 mph straight down toward the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia.”

Cox doesn’t tell jokes. But he does tell humorous stories, in his native Ozark Mountain accent. One of them was about the time, after all his supersonic stunts, he was turned down for a job as a commercial pilot...because he’s only 5 feet 4 inches tall.

“If you want to get an audience’s attention,” he says, “start with a story about personal failure. No one can relate to speakers who walk in as if they’re better than everyone else. People want to know how they can work more effectively with the guy sitting next to them back at the office. And they want to know how they can improve their own performance.”

Toward that end, Cox sends his association clients detailed questionnaires about their organizational goals, and their members’ needs. And, being from the Ozarks, he’s not above using a little homespun humor to illustrate his points about dealing with priorities.

“If you’ve got a frog to swallow,” he says, “don’t look at it too long. And if you’ve got more than one to swallow, start with the biggest one first.” — SW